

## December 3, 2009 - Afghanistan Plan Roils the Hill

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By David Rogers

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Anxious Democrats show little appetite for seriously blocking President Barack Obama's new war strategy for Afghanistan and appear to be looking for ways instead to bridge their differences with the White House before funding is debated next year.

Obama hurt his own cause with an uncertain performance Tuesday night as he announced his 30,000-troop buildup from West Point. But the president is helped by a strong Cabinet, and the months of internal administration deliberations paid dividends Wednesday as Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton teamed up in forceful appearances before skeptical Senate and House committees.

The House remains the greater challenge than the Senate, but even there, the party leadership seems intent on trying to minimize its divisions with the president.

The Appropriations leadership is pushing back against demands from anti-war liberals for a quick vote on funding next month, and this delay buys time for Obama to proceed with his plan and negotiate conditions or benchmarks to bring along Democrats.

“There will be conditions,” said Rep. John Murtha, who will manage what’s anticipated to be a \$35 billion to \$40 billion request for new Pentagon and State Department funding in support of the president’s policy. And the Pennsylvania Democrat believes Obama and Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) each has an interest in avoiding outright conflict that would surrender the issue to Republicans.

“I know Nancy is very uncomfortable if this were to pass without a majority of Democrats. Very uncomfortable,” Murtha told POLITICO. “And I believe [Obama is] concerned about it himself. He wants to make sure he gets what he needs.”

Gates and Clinton shared the stage Wednesday with Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the same three are due back Thursday before the Senate Foreign Relations and House Armed Services Committees.

They met open skepticism from both parties. “It seems to me that the large influx of U.S. combat troops will put more U.S. Marines on street corners in Afghan villages, with too few Afghan partners alongside them,” Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) complained at the Senate Armed Services Committee in the morning. But there was also some measure of humor, as seen in an afternoon exchange between Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and Clinton at the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Invoking the old saying “a camel is a horse designed by a committee,” Flake suggested Obama’s Afghanistan strategy proved to be a “policy designed by a committee.”

“Camels are sturdy animals,” Clinton shot back.

Most striking was the heavy emphasis that Gates — a veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency before coming to the Pentagon — put on what he described as an “unholy alliance” of Al Qaeda terrorists and Taliban forces in both Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan.

“Defeating Al Qaeda and enhancing Afghan security are mutually reinforcing missions,” Gates told senators. “They cannot be untethered from one another, as much as we might wish that to be the case.”

“Put simply, the Taliban and Al Qaeda have become symbiotic, each benefitting from the success and mythology of the other. ... Taliban success in retaking and holding parts of Afghanistan, against the combined forces of multiple modern armies — the current direction of events — has dramatically strengthened the extremist mythology and popular perceptions of who is winning and who is losing.”

The exceptionally tough rhetoric comes despite the fact that intelligence reports as recently as two months ago indicated a diminished Al Qaeda presence in Afghanistan. Gates is well-respected, but the new tone has raised concern among some Democrats that Obama has chosen to oversell this security threat in Afghanistan much as critics contend the Bush administration did for its war effort in Iraq.

Dennis Blair, the director of national intelligence, is expected to meet with Murtha's House defense appropriations panel, possibly as early as this week, to review the situation. But as seen in the president's own speech Tuesday, the image of Afghanistan as the "epicenter" of international terrorism is one the administration is now prepared to use for political leverage in the war debate.

Even as this threat has been elevated, Obama is also asking for the discretion — not just to put U.S. troops into Afghanistan but also to begin pulling them back out 18 months later, in July 2011.

In a series of sharp exchanges with Gates, Obama's old presidential rival Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) demanded greater clarity. Setting an arbitrary deadline, McCain said, would undercut a "winning strategy" and contradict the president's pledge to make any future withdrawal contingent on conditions on the ground.

"Which is it?" the senator snapped impatiently. "It's got to be one or the other. It's got to be the appropriate conditions, or it's got to be an arbitrary date. You can't have both."

"What we're talking about is the beginning of the process, not the end of that process," Gates answered, and both he and Mullen said the July 2011 date was a benchmark blessed by the military as a reasonable point to assess the effectiveness of the strategy.

Announcing it in advance served Obama's purposes in trying to put pressure on the Kabul government to move faster in the same period on promised reforms. But Gates said that the 2007 U.S. surge in Iraq had run just 14 months, and by July 2011, Marine units in Helmand Province will have had two years and three Afghan fighting seasons to test their effectiveness against the insurgents in that Taliban stronghold.

A preliminary evaluation will be made in December 2010, a year from now. But Gates said the hope was that beginning July 2011 — in at least the most secure portions of Afghanistan — American forces could turn over control either to Afghan army units or local militias, which he hopes will emerge as a major force working with the central

government.

&ldquo;We&rsquo;re not just going to throw these guys in the swimming pool and walk away,&rdquo; Gates testified. And when pressed by Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), Clinton answered, &ldquo;I do not believe we have locked ourselves into leaving. But what we have done ... is to signal very clearly to all audiences that the United States is not interested in occupying Afghanistan.&rdquo;

With the addition of the new troops, the total U.S. force level will be nearly 100,000, and Gates estimates that U.S. allies will ultimately provide an additional 50,000 in Afghanistan. When lawmakers suggested that the Taliban would simply lay low until 2011, hoping the U.S. would leave, the secretary was unfazed.

&ldquo;We would certainly welcome them not being active for the next 18 months,&rdquo; Gates said, &ldquo;Because it would give us open-field running.&rdquo;

Apart from training Afghan forces, that same open field would fall in Clinton&rsquo;s development projects and a still unclear &ldquo;civilian surge&rdquo; to complement the troop deployment. The secretary said she inherited a situation with just 300 civilian workers for State and development programs in Afghanistan. That number has now grown to about 800 and should reach near 1,000 by early next year, when an additional 200 to 300 personnel could be added as well, officials said.